



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sequoia and Kings Canyon
National Parks

47050 Generals
Highway Three Rivers,
CA 93271

559 565-3341 phone
559 565-3730 fax

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks News Release

January 30, 2008

For Immediate Release

Alexandra Picavet 559 565-3131

Avalanche Fatality in Sequoia National Park

Morgan Cowles, a 39-year-old man from Santa Barbara, California, was killed in an avalanche in Sequoia National Park on Monday, January 28.

Late Sunday night, the National Park Service received a report that two winter travelers were overdue from a winter backcountry trip in Sequoia National Park. A search and rescue effort began immediately. Early Monday morning, two teams of rescuers with advanced technical winter travel skills began skiing from Wolverton, near Giant Forest, toward the Pear Lake Ski Hut, looking for signs of the two missing men.

After almost 5 hours, searchers located the body of Morgan Cowles among trees at the bottom of an avalanche chute. Medical assessment failed to find any signs of life. The two rescue teams joined and followed the tracks of the second man, who was found in good condition and escorted out of the backcountry by the search team.

The two men had spent Saturday night at the Pear Lake Ski Hut, approximately 6 miles from Wolverton. On Sunday they left the hut, intending to ski and snowboard out, but were caught in a severe snow and windstorm that caused whiteout conditions. They were carrying a tent and camping gear, and camped overnight at Heather Lake, approximately 4 miles from Wolverton. They set out again on Monday morning but lost the trail, and crossed a steep slope, where the avalanche occurred. The initial investigation indicates that both men were swept more than 200 yard downslope in the avalanche.

Both men were experienced in safe winter over-snow travel and knowledgeable about avalanches. Each was equipped with an avalanche beacon, which is used to transmit or receive signals should a person need to be found or to locate a buried person. They appeared to have followed safe practices for traveling in avalanche zones. However, with the recent heavy snowfall after a significant rain earlier in the week, conditions were especially unstable at the time.

These conditions delayed recovery of the body until Tuesday. A team of six members of the Tulare County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue Team, four National Park Rangers, and two local volunteer search and rescuers, with the assistance of a helicopter, recovered the body and transferred it to the Tulare County Sheriff's Coroner.

Parks staff can recall no avalanche deaths in Sequoia and Kings Canyon in the past several decades, though the Southern Sierra Nevada often has high avalanche danger. Appropriate precautions and knowing the conditions is always an important part of winter travel in the mountains.